

Bridging Distances in Women's Preventive Services and Concerns: Improving Quality and Communication

Abstract

In order to improve understanding of both women's perspectives and communication strategies for preventive services in the region, the Pan American Health Organization and members of the Alliance for Cervical Cancer Prevention, as well as national research institutions, provided support for the research.

The central purpose of the paper is to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding women's perceptions regarding cervical cancer, and particularly, towards early detection. The paper is based upon the review of results from four qualitative studies undertaken in Latin America in Mexico, Venezuela, Ecuador, El Salvador and Peru. These four studies each addressed barriers to cervical cancer early detection with PAP smear, and one in particular focused on perceived benefits as well as communication and promotion strategies amongst health care providers.

Aside from concerns regarding levels of information and knowledge about cervical cancer, there are deep cultural frameworks which must be taken into account when topics such as death or sexuality are under discussion. Therefore, a comprehensive approach was required for these studies in order to allow for a broad understanding of women's perceptions of health risks and preventive behavior; an approach which was placed within the cultural frameworks that shape women's attitudes.

Studies confirm that the main barriers to screening tests are: shame, access, socio-economic barriers. These barriers can be resolved at low cost by health authorities and health care providers. Most importantly, it is critical for us to acknowledge that women are afraid of a disease such as cervical cancer and develop images of death and putrefaction in their minds when confronted by the thought of the disease. This in turn negatively affects their willingness to be screened. Health providers must, therefore, be sensitive when communicating with women, in order to avoid deepening fear of illness and death, as well as a negative attitude towards the screening tests.

Studies have shown also that women obtain end- benefits when they are screened, such as: peace of mind; being empowered to take care of self and family; a sense of responsibility for self; and a healthy appearance which contributes to social acceptance. It is important for health services to promote the screening tests by addressing these benefits for women. One of the main findings from the above mentioned research is the need to improve quality in service delivery as well as quality of care. A quality model for service delivery and care was designed at PAHO, which addresses women's satisfaction with preventive services, and discusses facility improvement. In an important shift of focus, the model also touches upon human resource issues, seeking to integrate quality control and communications into the work patterns of the public health workforce. The model will soon be tested and improved if necessary, in order to become a technical cooperation tool for the cervical cancer project.



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